

# Vicksburg National Military Park

National Park Service  
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Vicksburg National Military Park



## David Glasgow Farragut



### First Admiral of the Navy

A significant contributing factor to the Union success at Vicksburg was the skill of the North's naval commanders, one of the most colorful being Admiral David Glasgow Farragut. Though unsuccessful in early naval operations against Vicksburg, Farragut's success at New Orleans and Mobile Bay secured his place in history as one of America's most celebrated Civil War heroes.

### "I Soon Became Fond of This Adventurous Sort of Life."

The man who became the first Admiral of the United States Navy, was born James Glasgow Farragut on July 6, 1801, near Knoxville, Tennessee. His father, Jorge Farragut, hailed from a seafaring family and emigrated to this country in 1776 from the island of Minorca, off the east coast of Spain. Before his death in 1817, Jorge Farragut would serve his country gallantly in the Revolutionary War and War of 1812. Young James would soon follow in his father's footsteps.

David Porter, one of the Navy's finest officers, befriended the Farragut family through an unusual chain of events when the Farraguts rescued Porter's unconscious father from the deck of a drifting boat. When the elder Porter passed away, David was grateful to the family for taking care of his father,

and offered to take young James and train him as a naval officer. At the time, it was not uncommon for parents to place a child with someone who could train them in a career. Hence, James Glasgow Farragut came under the guardianship of David Porter and changed his name to David G. Farragut.

Following his adopted father to sea at the tender age of eight, David Glasgow Farragut received his first naval appointment as midshipman-at-large at the age of nine-and-a-half. At 11 he saw his first combat, and even commanded a vessel at age 12! The young sailor had seen much during his four years at sea, but his greatest achievement was yet to come.

### "I Am to Have a Flag in the Gulf, and the Rest Depends on Me."



Fifty years later, at the outbreak of the Civil War, David G. Farragut had a difficult decision to make. Born in Tennessee, raised in Louisiana, and living in Virginia, he felt more devoted to the country he had served for more than five decades. Deciding to join the Union, Farragut moved his family north. In January 1862, Farragut was named Flag Officer in command of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron with instructions to enter the Mississippi River and capture New Orleans. He was placed in command of 18 wooden vessels including his flagship HARTFORD, a fleet of mortar boats, and 700 men.

To the objection of his stepbrother, David Dixon Porter, who was in charge of the mortar boat flotilla, Flag Officer Farragut elected to run past Forts Jackson and St. Philip to take the city of New Orleans. To prepare the ships, the crews crisscrossed the hulls with great chains until they were almost as well protected as the ironclads.

And, since he planned to pass the forts at night, Farragut had the hulls covered with mud from the Mississippi to make them less visible from the shore, and the decks painted white so that needed objects would stand out clearly. Tall trees were lashed to the vessels' masts so the enemy would think they were trees on the opposite bank.

Farragut's strategy worked. The commander described the intense passage:

*"The smoke was so dense that it was only now and then we could see anything but the flash of the cannon ... The passing of Forts Jackson and St. Philip was one of the most awful sights I ever saw."*

His own vessel, the HARTFORD, was disabled when a raft, set afire, rammed the flagship, damaging the masts and rigging. Nevertheless, the fleet safely reached New Orleans, and took possession of the city on April 28, 1862.

**"I Mean to be Whipped or to Whip My Enemy, and not be Scared to Death."**



In May of 1862, Farragut attempted to capture the city of Vicksburg, located approximately 400 river miles above New Orleans. Not having enough guns in his fleet to overwhelm the city, however, his bombardment was unsuccessful. Additionally, Vicksburg's 200-ft river bluffs were so high, many of his guns could not obtain sufficient elevation to hit the Confederate defenses. Fearing the receding waters of the Mississippi might strand his oceangoing warships in the summer months, Farragut reluctantly withdrew from the river city, back to New Orleans, but leaving six gunboats below Vicksburg.

Upon his return to the Crescent City, Farragut began organizing a second, stronger expedition against the "Gibraltar of the West." His fleet once again arrived below the Vicksburg bluffs on June 25, 1862, and began preparations for a second bombardment. When Farragut received news that Charles H. Davis, commander of the Western Flotilla, had finally captured Fort Pillow and Memphis, and was now only 20 miles north of Vicksburg, he decided to run his fleet past the city, and rendezvous with Davis.

At the appointed hour of 0200 on June 28, 1862, Farragut raised two red lanterns on the mast of the HARTFORD as a signal for the fleet to proceed. The ships were spotted at 0400, and Vicksburg's 29 heavy guns were answered by the guns of Farragut's fleet. All but three of Farragut's ships made it past the batteries, and none were sunk,

Although some were badly damaged, including the HARTFORD. The captain's cabin was blown apart by a shell just seconds after Farragut moved to another part of the ship!

Although running the batteries was a gallant act, Farragut's joining with Davis did little to bring about the subjugation of Vicksburg. It became clear a combined naval and land attack would be necessary to take the "Gibraltar of the West."

Before Farragut withdrew his fleet from Vicksburg a second time, he encountered the Confederate ironclad ARKANSAS. Launched at Yazoo City and commanded by Isaac Brown, the ARKANSAS bravely plunged into the midst of the 38 Union warships anchored above Vicksburg in mid-July 1862. Brown's attack was aided by an element of surprise, and the inability of so many Union ships to maneuver in the limited space. As a result, Farragut's warships were only able to bring a few guns at a time to bear against the formidable ironclad. During the fighting, the ARKANSAS caused serious damage to the HARTFORD. Farragut was furious that a makeshift enemy ironclad had steamed right through his fleet, and had endured enough of the pesky ironclad. Again fearing his vessels would be stranded due to dropping river levels, Farragut decided to withdraw from Vicksburg and sail south. This withdrawal of the Union fleet in July 1862, closed the first phase of Union naval operations against the city.

**"Damn the Torpedoes! Full Speed Ahead!"**



*USS Hartford*



*Farragut's Statue, Farragut Square, Washington, DC*

Two years later, in 1864, Rear Admiral Farragut was summoned from his New York home to again serve his country in leading an attack on Mobile Bay, the last Confederate stronghold on the Gulf of Mexico. Mobile Bay was not only protected by Fort Morgan and a fleet of wooden vessels, but also by the formidable Confederate ram, TENNESSEE, and a field of explosive mines called torpedoes. Undaunted, Farragut readied his fleet for battle. Using a strategy that had worked previously, he ordered his wooden ships lashed together in pairs, one large and one small. If the larger frigate was disabled in battle, the smaller vessel could tow it to safety.

Farragut's fleet of wooden ships, along with four small ironclad monitors, began the attack on Mobile Bay early in the morning of August 5, 1864. When the smoke of battle became so thick obscuring his vision, Farragut climbed the rigging of the HARTFORD, lashing himself near the top of the mainsail to get a better view. Before long, the TECUMSEH, one of the monitors leading the way, struck a torpedo and sank in a matter minutes. In a state of confusion, the fleet came to a halt in front of the powerful guns of Fort Morgan. Realizing the fleet was reluctant to move forward due to the "infernal machines," Rear Admiral Farragut rallied his men to victory, shouting:

*"Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!"*

The Union fleet forged ahead through the minefield, blasting Fort Morgan, and capturing the Confederate ironclad TENNESSEE. Thus, Mobile Bay fell into Union hands in one of the most decisive naval victories of the Civil War.

The Battle of Mobile Bay would be Farragut's last. Overcome with fatigue he returned to New York in December 1864, a national hero. In 1866, Farragut became the first person in the history of the United States Navy to be awarded the rank of Admiral. Two years later, in 1868, he was asked to run for the office of President of the United States, but replied,

*"I hasten to assure you that I have never for one moment entertained the idea of political life."*

Farragut would live only two more years. The first Admiral of the Navy died on August 14, 1870, at the age of 69. His funeral procession in New York City included 10,000 soldiers and sailors, and was led by President Ulysses S. Grant. A statue of Admiral Farragut was erected in the heart of the nation's capital, and is known as Farragut Square. It remains a lasting tribute to the most distinguished naval officer of the Civil War.